

As The Seasons Change (we do, too) by EmeraldTulip

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

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Summary:

Spring turns to summer and Mike falls out of love. Summer turns to autumn and he falls right back in—but it's with the wrong person. Three years later, autumn turns to winter and he knows that everything is different.

As The Seasons Change (we do, too)

Author's Note:

woot woot more byeler fic

this is dedicated to my friend mish, [@biwheeler](#) on tumblr and here on ao3 at skyrockets because she's awesome and also ships byeler and i just love talking to her! also because she opened my eyes to max and will friendship, and we discussed how will's healing process would likely go and ugh she's just so amazing, guys.

anyway! i hope you all enjoy!

It's April. They're almost in high school now, the two months left of school leading into the summer before freshmen year looming over them, thirteen turning fourteen years old and counting, and Mike knows that everything is different, or at least is *going* to be different—and not just because of the monsters.

Even now, four months after the Snowball, he remembers the feeling of his stomach flipping and his eyes going wide as El walked through the school's doors in her new dress. He remembers how electric she made him feel when they kissed. He knows that he loved her, because she's dazzling and bright and so, so *beautiful*. It almost burns. And he knows that they're barely teenagers, and he knows that it's a little early to experience love, but that doesn't change that it is what it is.

He visits her in the (new) Hopper family's hidden cabin once a week, usually accompanied by the others. They hold hands, sometimes, and on the rare occasion they're left alone, Mike will indulge himself in more of that electricity he finds himself chasing after all the time. Her hair curls as her vocabulary expands, and her wardrobe slowly evolves with the help of their friends into something that's a mix of what the Chief had been giving her, more of Nancy's old clothes, and whatever she'd been wearing when she showed up at Will's doorstep.

El is the wind and smoke and lightning, shifting and changing as she feels like it, and Mike loves her for it. They all do.

But then spring turns to summer and Mike falls out of love.

It happens all at once and he doesn't understand: he sees Eleven now and he still loves her—because how could he not?—but the burning feeling is gone. There are no more butterflies, no more eyes-wide-open moments. The memory of electricity has dulled—he hasn't kissed her in a while, and he thinks with a thrill of fear that she must have noticed.

So one day in June, he grabs his bike and pedals into the woods even though it's four in the afternoon on a Tuesday and not a visiting day. He moves as though he isn't in control of his own body anymore, and as he knocks on the door he feels another tingle of fear because though the pain isn't comparable, *this is what Will must have felt like when He was here.*

El lets him in, confused because she knows no one scheduled this. Mike looks at her, with her hair curling around her ears and one of Max's sweatshirts layered on top of Nancy's old pale yellow T-shirt paired with some of Will's jeans and black combat boots he doesn't recognize, and he doesn't know how to tell her that he doesn't think he can kiss her anymore and he doesn't know why.

So he tries, instead. He leans forward with every intent to meet her mouth, but he just... can't. He *can't*. He turns his head at the last minute and kisses her cheek instead before hugging her. A surge of guilt wells up in his chest and he can't quite pinpoint *why*, because it's not like he's hurting her by not kissing her.

"I love you," he says instead, and it doesn't feel like a lie at all.

Her arms come up to wind around his shoulders, and he feels her mouth turn up into a small smile—the only kind she knows how to make. "Thank you, Mike. I love you, too."

There's something in her voice that should give Mike pause, but he ignores it because maybe reality won't exist if he pretends it isn't there.

Spring turns to summer, and Mike pretends that he's still in love.

Summer break rolls right on by, and the high school building looms in the mind of every incoming freshman—including Mike.

So he does what every sane kid would do: he ignores it. He fills the dull spaces between waking and sleeping with friends (and less with family), with day trips to a nearby lake, with visits to the Hopper House, with absolutely *anything*. It goes by in a flash, his basement blurring in with Will's room and then the park, every time they watch Max as she skates mixing up with playing with Dustin's new cat and chasing Lucas' sister down for stealing their stuff. Mike thinks that maybe next year, he should try to slow down, because summer is gone far too quickly for his liking and it feels like he's done nothing at all.

That feeling comes to a complete stop, however, one day in September. School has been in session for a few weeks already, and the leaves are turning red and yellow. Mike walks through the forest with Will (and only him) at his side, taking careful steps that crunch on every brown leaf and coordinate with Will's smaller strides.

They walk in circles for a while before Will takes an abrupt turn. Mike follows him because he's too trusting, because even though this is the same forest where everything has gone wrong in the past and Will tried to kill him a year ago, Mike would die for him.

And it wasn't even Will, then, he reminds himself. It's hard to shake the memory of Will's shattered eyes and broken screams, the emptiness of a slate wiped clean and the horrendous thrashing and the pure *hatred* in his face, but Mike knows it wasn't Will at all.

He doesn't know what comes over him, but as Castle Byers comes into view and they fall back into step with each other, Mike grabs Will's hand. He's only fourteen years old, but he knows what love is. He knows that electricity El used to give him, and he knows that Will's hand gives him that, too.

They settle down inside the fort, Mike so tall that his head brushes the ceiling as they sit. He realizes that Will hasn't let go of his hand,

and he still doesn't as his right one picks up a sketchbook. He flips it open and Mike watches as each page presents a face—some in deft strokes of black marker on white, some loose sketches in pencil, but most in strange monochromatic color pencil pallets that are almost ethereally beautiful. He sees exactly one self-portrait of Will, in indigo. His lips are tilted down into a frown, but he doesn't look sad—maybe just focused. Mike notices Max in orange, her face taking up the whole page with hair seemingly spilling off the edges—Will really does seem to be making the effort to help her integrate into the party. Even if Mike still isn't thrilled about it, he recognizes that she helps Will, and that Lucas likes her, and they all deserve it. Lucas himself is in a pale red, looking challengingly out at the figurative audience with his bandana on. Dustin is in a bright, sunshine yellow, grinning at someone out of the metaphorical frame. There's El in green, one page with her face just as he knows Will first remembers seeing her—shaved head, Nancy's dress with the neat collar, determined stare. The page directly opposite has more of El in the same color, but smaller, different angles and hairstyles and outfits, one sketch of her wrist with the tattoo, some full-body silhouettes. Mike supposes that Will probably gets El to model for him a lot—they've been spending a lot more time with each other since Jim and Joyce started dating.

There's one of Mrs. Byers herself in some dark shade of pink, with a bright smile Mike can't really ever remember seeing on her—and he's known the woman for ten years, so that says a lot. There's Jonathan in turquoise, camera raised just up to his shoulder. There's one of Steve in purple, bat over his shoulder. Nancy makes the cut as well, a gray-blue color tracing her as she looks over her shoulder. Even Chief gets a sketch, though it's not done—Mike can only make out the vague shape of his hat and face in a mustard yellow before the page turns.

He spots himself, too, on more than one occasion. His face takes up several pages in light shades of blue, soft smile on his face as his hair falls into his eyes no matter the angle or pose, and his stomach swoops because in that moment he understands how Will sees him.

When summer arrived he knew he wasn't in love anymore, but as autumn storms past he knows that he's fallen right back in.

Senior year is crazy even within the first month. El is working overtime already, managing the lighting booth for the theater club and taking a job at the local diner as a waitress during the evenings. Lucas is on the football team and Dustin joins band. Max works the afternoon shifts at the skate shop across the street from the diner—she hasn't lived with her mom or stepdad or stepbrother in over a year, hopping between her friends' houses; she needs the money.

Will joins in with El, volunteering on weekends to paint the backdrop for the school plays and working as a waiter at the same diner. Will and El do everything together, now, because Joyce Byers is now Joyce Hopper, El has a family after a lifetime without one, and Will finally has the sister he needs and has a mutual understanding with. They finally have all the things they deserve.

Mike, on the other hand, doesn't even have a job because his parents insist he doesn't need one.

"You need to focus on your studies, Michael," his mother tells him when he hesitantly proposes the idea of him finding a job—at the grocer, maybe, or the music store that opened right next door to the skate shop. "College is coming up fast, and you don't have time to be away from your schoolwork."

"Besides," his father says through a mouthful of roast beef. "We have all the money you need. Once you have a degree and a *real* job, you can support yourself, but until then, just let us handle it."

And it makes Mike feel *bad*, because his dad talks like he doesn't know that Will and El and Max need the money from their apparently "not real jobs". It makes him feel bad because he sees their name tags, the tiny silver pins that read *Will* and *Jane*, the lanyard with the card that said *Maxine M.* until Max took a sharpie to it, the uniform with *Sinclair* and the feathered hat with *Henderson*, and Mike wants to do *something*. It makes him feel bad because he feels useless all the time, because he might not *need* to support himself but he *wants* to. He wants to know that he can do it.

He sulks in his room a lot, alone, turning the pages in his textbooks without reading anything at all, and it just so happens that one Wednesday in November the temperature plummets. That day at half

past four, he hears his supercom buzz on his bedside table, and he turns to frown at it. None of them really use it to communicate anymore. But he sets aside his homework to pick it up and listens as Will's voice floods through, staticky, telling him to come downstairs.

Mike instantly flies out into the hallway, pulling on his jacket over his thick sweater. He thunders past Nancy's empty room, which is slowly accumulating new layers of dust once again—even just in the two months since she'd gone back to college.

"I'm going out, Mom," he says, slowing down in the kitchen just enough to get the words out coherently. She says something after him, but he's already out the door.

"Mike," Will sighs as the front door closes behind him. He's wearing a puffy coat that has a distinct "this used to be Jonathan's" look, and there's a hat pulled over his hair. He has a small bag slung over his shoulder. Mike notices the goosebumps on the back of Will's exposed neck—the result of cool air interacting with a haircut from junior year that Will has maintained. Before Mike can reply, Will's arms are wrapped tightly around him. "I'm so glad you were home."

"Like I would be anywhere else," he replies, somewhat bitterly. Then he frowns. "I thought you were supposed to be working at the diner with El tonight. It's Wednesday."

"Called in sick," Will mumbles. "Technically not lying."

The alarms go off in Mike's head. "Anniversary effect?" he asks, and Will just nods, burying his face into Mike's shoulder. Static crackles in Mike's ear, and he suddenly realizes how Will called him on his radio when Will's own comm is nowhere in sight.

The anniversary effect, Mike knows, is a very real thing. Will really does have PTSD, it's just that the inter-dimensional visions thrown in make it hard to differentiate what's what. But it's November, and it's finally getting—

"Cold," Will says, finishing Mike's thought. "Yeah. That's what set it off. It's cold."

Mike blinks for a moment—he'll never get used to Will cluing into his thoughts. But the cold has never had the same connotations for any of them since the Mind Flayer, and Mike knows it's the worst for Will. "Okay. Well... what do you want to do? Where do you want to go?"

"Quarry," Will answers immediately. "The quarry." Mike tenses up, because Will's suggested it before but they've never actually gone through with it, and now he really sounds certain and Mike's not sure he can do it. "If that's okay with you," Will adds, tugging the strap of his bag so Mike can feel it. "I... I can't draw, not right now, but I brought Jonath—*my camera.*"

Mike feels Will breathe against him for a moment and eyelashes flutter by his neck, making him shiver. He can't draw, it always turns into maps and vines and dark versions of what he starts out with. *It's November.*

Will deserves this—to make his art, to get a grip on his fears, and if Mike can help then he will. "Yeah. It's fine. Let's go." Then he pauses, because Will and El's shared car (a gift from Dr. Owens they hadn't wanted until they realized how practical it was) is nowhere in sight. "Wait. How did you get here? How are we getting there? My parents would never let me take the car."

Will pulls away, smiling slightly. He picks up a skateboard leaning against the side of Mike's house—right, of course. Will and Max are really close, now, due to shared trauma and shared interests, and she's been teaching him to skate. Honestly, he's not bad. "We both know *you're* terrible, though," Will teases halfheartedly. "And there's no way we're skating all the way out there anyway. El needs our car at six, Lucas is at practice and Dustin is in rehearsal so we can't take theirs, but Max is working late tonight and when I called she said we could borrow hers until half past eleven."

Mike groans dramatically, and Will laughs softly (and that's why Mike does it). Max's car is a *really* old secondhand one, fixed up with parts cobbled together from the junkyard with help from Dustin, Lucas, and Steve, and it always smells like burnt onion rings. Mike hates it, and everyone knows it—but it drives (even if it doesn't go much over twenty-five miles per hour). And, anyway, if it's to help

Will, then Mike will do anything.

Will tucks the board under his arm, a silent signal that tells Mike that they're walking. Mike watches Will carefully, sees how the small smile on his face falls almost instantly after their laughter is done. Without thinking, Mike takes Will's free hand, ungloved, tangling their fingers. Will's breath catches for a moment, and Mike pretends not to notice. They walk like that until they get within the vicinity of the shops, and then Will reluctantly drops Mike's hand and shoves his own into his pocket. Mike pretends that his heart doesn't also fall.

His watch beeps the hour—five o'clock—as they wave at Max through the window, keeping their heads low so Will's supervisors at the diner across the street don't see him skipping out. She grins at them, quickly scurrying to the door and tossing Will her car keys.

"Have fun, boys," their Zoomer—Rogue, during campaigns, but in their hearts she'll always be a Zoomer—grins. Mike can't believe he ever hated her—she's fiery and funny and she *cares*, and even if she's still annoying, well, Mike has been putting up with Dustin for five years and arguing with Lucas for ten (and Holly, jeez, as soon as she started talking she just *didn't stop*). Max really is a force of nature, and Mike knows he's always going to care about her no matter what the end of high school brings.

"Thanks again, Max," Will says as he twirls the keyring around his finger. His smile is weak, as it always tends to be, but the redhead's presence seems to loosen him up at least a little bit.

"No problem," Max waves it off. "Just be back by—"

"Eleven-thirty," Mike interrupts, grinning smugly. She knows he's not really being mean. "We got it, MadMax."

"Whatever, Bike Wheels," she retorts, nickname sparking a wicked glint in her eyes before it fades. "Just... you know, come back safe. We all know how this town gets."

Will makes a little noise of agreement in the back of his throat, and Mike knows it's because Will really does know how Hawkins gets. He knows because Will has told him that he can sense the town itself, as

it lives and breathes.

He shakes his head to clear his thoughts. “Yeah. Sure. See you later.” He grabs Will’s elbow as they walk around the corner to the staff parking lot. Will makes a beeline for the driver’s seat, and Mike doesn’t protest like he usually would because it seems like Will could benefit from focused driving. Instead, he just clammers up into the passenger’s seat and rolls down the window before the burnt onion ring smell can get to him. Will turns the key and the car splutters to life, hacking in a way that makes Mike grimace nervously. He takes Will’s hand again and Will doesn’t startle—which is good, since he’s driving. They drive the rest of the way in silence, Will’s left hand on the wheel and Mike’s on his right.

Will slows to a stop as the quarry comes into view just as Mike’s watch beeps the hour once again—six o’clock. Mike lets his thumb brush over Will’s knuckles before he lets go and jumps out. Will does the same, bringing out his camera bag but leaving his skateboard in the backseat.

Mike watches Will for a moment as he looks around, hefting the camera contemplatively as if considering taking a picture. After a moment he lowers it frowning slightly. Mike wants to walk over, to ask what’s wrong, but at this point *everything* feels wrong so he looks away. He wanders down to the cliff’s edge, staring down into the water for a moment before he sits, legs dangling over the side. He finally hears the sound of the camera clicking before Will walks over to join him.

“What’re you thinking about?” he asks as he sits, setting the camera down behind them, warmth pressing into Mike’s side. He doesn’t ask *what’s wrong?* and Mike loves him for it.

Mike shrugs, eyes fixed on the horizon, light rapidly fading. “You know what happened here.” He remembers, so vividly, the feeling of plummeting past rock toward deadly hard water. He remembers how he hadn’t screamed until he stopped falling. He remembers thinking, *this is it. This is how I die. We’ll never find Will. I’ll never see him again.*

He remembers watching the firemen pulling Will’s body out of the water, too, the plummeting of his heart and hope. He remembers how

hard he had cried that night—only rivaled by the night El disappeared. He remembers how awful this place feels.

Will's hand presses between his shoulder blades, over his coat, firm and grounding in a way that Mike finds so ironic for the boy who never goes a month without slipping into another dimension. “Yeah. I know.” He’s silent for a moment. Then the hand comes away from Mike’s back and he takes his hand. “That’s why I wanted to come here.”

And Mike already knows. He knows that this is the place that he thought he’d lost Will forever, that this is the place he thought he’d die in. He knows that the stories give Will nightmares—normal ones, not visions, but they’re just as bad. He already knows why Will brought him here, because Will always knows how to take something ugly and turn it into something beautiful.

So Mike squeezes Will’s hand. It’s comfortable, familiar, and something shifts in his chest because everyone around them seems to think that it shouldn’t be. They’ve been like this for at least three years, probably much longer. But there isn’t a clear “like this”, they just... are. It doesn’t make any sense, and the question pops into his head, unbidden: *What are we?*

He’s not going to ask it; he doesn’t want to burden Will with anything else. It’s not the same as him and El were—it can’t be. And Mike knows that he loves Will, thinks he loves him *like that*, but Will’s the one who can read minds, not the other way around. And the way Will acts around him, Mike sometimes *thinks* he feels the same, though he can’t be sure. But Will hears him.

“I don’t know,” he says out loud. His grip tightens on Mike’s hand. “I don’t know what we are.” He looks at Mike, and Mike can see the fear shining in his green eyes. “Do you?”

Mike thinks about lying—but Will would know, anyway, and Mike doesn’t need to lie to him anymore. “No. But we can figure it out.”

“Figure it out,” Will repeats, and suddenly Mike sees it: he recognizes the feeling of his stomach flipping and his eyes going wide when Will grabs his hand. He recognizes how electric Will makes him feel when

he just walks *nearby*. He recognizes that he loves Will, because he's dazzling and bright and so brilliant. He's brilliant, and it *burns*. It burns and burns until the darkness is forced out and the heat settles until it's a comfortable warmth. And he recognizes that they're teenagers, that it's still a little early to experience love, especially for the second time around, but that doesn't change that it is what it is. This is El all over again but different, because this is a boy, this is *Will*, and it's beautiful—he's *beautiful*.

"Yeah," Mike says. "But if it changes anything, I think I love you."

Will's eyes still look afraid, but he smiles. *I'm not in your head all the time*, he tells Mike. *I don't like it. It reminds me of Him. So I wasn't sure.* "It changes a lot of things," he says out loud. "Because I know I love you."

Mike's not sure who initiates it, but then they kiss, legs dangling off the cliff—and isn't that a great metaphor? Just a little past crazy, but they're crazy together—as their fingers clutch onto collars and sleeves. Mike's hands come up to the back of Will's neck, sliding into his hair, pulling him even closer. Something about this kiss feels *different* from electric, almost more like pure ozone has settled over his skin, and he's *buzzing* with it. He's warmed to the bone, and he hopes, in a part of his brain not lost in a fog, that Will feels it too. He doesn't deserve to be cold. Will fumbles with something behind him for a moment before lifting the camera, somehow managing to take a picture without dropping it or pulling away from Mike. And, *hell*, if Mike doesn't love him.

I still don't know what we are, Mike thinks, opening the doors and letting Will into his head. He doesn't know because he doesn't know what they *can* be, what they're *allowed* to be. But then Will pulls back an infinitesimal amount, his heavy breath tickling Mike's lips.

"We can be whatever we want," he says, barely a whisper. "We don't need permission. We can do anything we want."

Mike kisses him again, short and sweet. "Anything," he echoes, smiling, hand still on Will's neck and pulling him in again. "I like that."

They keep on like that for so long that they end up only having two pictures from that night— one of Mike, from behind, sitting on the cliff's edge as the light fades, and one of them kissing as the stars come out, angle tilted—but it's enough to know that Mike doesn't hate the quarry as much as he used to. Like he said, Will has always turned terrible things beautiful.

It's November, autumn is turning to winter, Mike's in love, and he knows that everything is different.

Author's Note:

i hope everyone enjoyed! comment down below any thoughts, and i'll get back to you asap! (and again, go read mishi's stuff because it's awesome!)

find me on tumblr, my main is [@fivehargreeves](#) and my writing blog is [@lowriting](#)!

thanks for reading, everyone!